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### Forum for *MWWT* (2001)

In terms of the classic film noir genre of the 1940s, these films are typically characterized with elements such as black-and-white hues, lighting effects, intricate plots, and existentialistic philosophy. After the trauma and strife of the Great Depression and era of World War II, Americans were in need of a new cinematic style of film that represented their experiences and current state of affairs. While film noir can be interpreted as more of a stylistic approach rather than a genre due to its crime-centered narratives and propaganda-like themes, this American film style has features that transcend several genres and decades. With that being said, *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001) is a modern example and tribute to the classic elements of film noir. The Coen brothers were able to reimagine and rediscover the original narratives and dialogue of Cain that reflect film noir.

A personal interpretation of film noir from theorist Peter Brooker suggests that *The Man Who Wasn't There* offers explorations of lust and its discontents in a Cain-esque appeal with a “deeply ironic representation of the uncertainty of human life.” In other words, the Coens revisit these same models and expand their significance with a broader, contemporary significance. Furthermore, the Coen brothers illustrate the same classic elements of mise-en-scene throughout the motion picture, almost as an adaptation of classical film noir. For example, the opening credits of *The Man Who Wasn't There* greatly resembles the same theme and transitions as earlier credits. In particular, the black-and-white picture with animated, “Early Hollywood” text

can be recognized at the introduction of *Angel Face* (1953), *Double Indemnity* (1944), and many others.

Starring Billy Bob Thornton and Frances McDormand, the Coen Brothers' masterful Cain-inspired rendition depicts a middle-aged couple in a small town in northern California during the late 1940s. A common aspect of classic noir are settings in major cities such as New York or Los Angeles, known for having a "dark underbelly" that exists beneath the allure. Similar to their other productions, the Coen Brothers are consistent with world-building and thoroughly developing a vision that resonates with audiences. The film presents a familiar atmosphere of suspicion and darkness, especially with the depiction of Thornton's character, Ed Crane. He appears to be a rather quiet, polished everyday working man who is married to an attractive, outgoing woman. In other words, the couple represents the average American husband and wife during 1949. However, unlike most film noirs of the cinematic era, there isn't a presence of powerful political statements, heavy social issues, or tragedy. Instead, the film takes a rather slower, meticulous approach to the American movie style as they unravel the implication behind "The Man Who Wasn't There".

Essentially, Ed Crane is a small-town barber with a rather mundane life. He is the second chair in a two-man barber shop run by his brother-in-law, Frank. Coupled with the visual aesthetics of classic film noir, Ed Crane typically lives his life in the shadows as a reserved, quiet type who chain smokes and frequently has existential thoughts that remain unsaid. As viewers, the only insight into Ed Crane's personality is according to his narrations, expanding on who he is as a character. It is understood that Crane is not a conman by nature and was not drawn towards a life of crime. As a matter of fact, he was longing for opportunity and open to the possibility of running his own business. However, after hosting dinner at their home one

evening, Crane suspects that his wife may be having an affair with her boss, Big Dave. James Gandolfini is introduced in a new fashion, unlike his infamous character, Tony Soprano, the intimidating mafia foreman of New Jersey. While he may still be in charge, he often expresses his vulnerability during times of stress and confides in Ed, who he oddly considers a close friend.

Be that as it may, a consistent theme of two-timing and back-stabbing unfolds after Ed Crane attempts to exploit Big Dave after a business opportunity arises. He creates a ploy to send an “anonymous” ransom note to Big Dave, threatening to publicize his affair with his wife, Doris. After receiving the money, he believes he is in the clear until he meets with Big Dave on evening in his office. Dave blows Ed’s cover and reveals his discovery of Ed’s ploy to deceive him. The situation takes a surprising turn and Ed becomes a criminal of not only extortion but murder—except his wife was taking a fall for the blame. This was the turning point and rising action of the film’s plot development. After Doris commits suicide in jail before her trial, it is unclear what is likely to happen next.

While the film was not exciting with thrill and entrenched on detective protagonists, it did illustrate criminality, infidelity, and tension. The Coen’s carefully utilized visual effects to strengthen the emotionally-charged scenes and accentuate the expressions of the subjects. The cinematography and camera movements associated with low-key lighting and composition emphasized shadows and the setting’s significance in association with film noir. Femme fatales, villains, and the struggle for survival are all common archetypes of the classic, Cold war era that were not present. However, crime, greed, and murder were consistent motifs that were used to craft the double-crossing, fake-love narrative that concluded with a not-so-happy ending corresponding to elements of film noir.